



C A L I F O R N I A   D E P A R T M E N T   O F

# Mental Health

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## **STATE MENTAL HEALTH DIRECTOR OFFERS ADVICE ON DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES CAUSED BY THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES**

SACRAMENTO — The emotional devastation in dealing with the Southern California wildfire disasters is every bit as real as the property destruction, according to State Mental Health Director Stephen W. Mayberg, Ph.D. Identifying and dealing with emotional needs now can help to speed up recovery and prevent long-term and debilitating consequences, such as depression or physical sickness.

“Children and the elderly are often the most vulnerable to the impact of trauma and experience a sense of helplessness,” said Dr. Mayberg. “It is important to identify and deal with the emotional stress and displacement due to loss of family members, friends, homes and personal possessions.”

Children may particularly worry about the potential loss of their parents or family members and often are fearful of the dark, being alone or even going to sleep. Common reactions exhibited among children include crying, depression, headaches and upset stomach, poor school performance, nightmares, appetite loss, confusion or irritability and a return to earlier behaviors, such as thumb sucking, bedwetting and bowel-control loss.

Children’s reactions should not be ignored. Although their behavior may be disruptive, they still need support, love and flexibility. It is generally not helpful to ask children how they feel about a certain incident but rather what affected or concerns them the most. A parent or family member should discuss these issues openly.

Children may be very inconsistent and uneven in their responses and may behave as if nothing has occurred for a period of time, alternating with periods of sadness and agitation. Children should be encouraged to talk about their fears, and they should be reassured that they are safe. Also, it is not abnormal for children to act out rebelliously because of inner fears. If stress, anxiety, depression or physical ailments continue, parents may wish to contact a local crisis counseling center.

Common reactions exhibited among adults include irritability and anger, sadness, lack of concentration, fatigue, headaches and nausea, increased alcohol or drug use, nightmares, loss of appetite, hyperactivity and sleeplessness. These are normal reactions by normal people to an abnormal event; however, if they persist assistance should be sought through a local crisis counseling centers.

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For those seeking assistance, the county crisis intervention 24-hour numbers for the five counties directly impacted by the fires are as follows:

|                |              |
|----------------|--------------|
| Los Angeles    | 800-854-7771 |
| Riverside      | 909-358-4705 |
| San Bernardino | 888-743-1478 |
| San Diego      | 800-479-3339 |
| Ventura        | 805-652-6727 |

A listing of all 58 county crisis intervention numbers can be found on the California Department of Mental Health Web site at [www.dmh.cahwnet.gov](http://www.dmh.cahwnet.gov). Individuals desiring mental health services may also contact their primary care physician for a mental health services referral.

Gov. Gray Davis issued an Executive Order on Oct. 27 establishing Local Assistance Centers in each of the impacted counties. These centers, which opened week, will coordinate applications for and referrals to emergency assistance and related programs offered by local, state and federal agencies. For more information, log on to the Office of Emergency Services Web site at <http://www.oes.ca.gov/>.

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Attachment